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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

2009 APR -9 P 3:55

James Bennie Skelton,)	C/A No.: 2:09-847-MBS-RSC
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
vs.)	
)	
Family Services Inc.,)	Report and Recommendation
)	
Defendant.)	
)	

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* complaint herein pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915. This review has been conducted in light of the following precedents: *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); and *Gordon v. Leeke*, 574 F.2d 1147 (4th Cir. 1978).

The complaint *sub judice* has been filed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915, which permits an indigent litigant to commence an action in federal court without paying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss the case upon a finding that the action "fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted" or is "frivolous or malicious." §1915(e)(2)(B)(i), (ii). A finding of frivolity can be made where

the complaint "lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact." *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 31 (1992). Hence, under § 1915(e)(2)(B), a claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte*. *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Allison v. Kyle*, 66 F.3d 71 (5th Cir. 1995).

A court may dismiss a claim as "factually frivolous" under § 1915(e) if the facts alleged are clearly baseless. *Denton*, 504 U.S. at 31. In making this determination, the court is not bound to accept without question the truth of the plaintiff's allegations, but rather need only weigh the plaintiff's factual allegations in his favor. *Id.*

This Court is required to liberally construe *pro se* documents, *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976), holding them to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys, *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 9 (1980) (*per curiam*). Even under this less stringent standard, however, the *pro se* complaint is subject to summary dismissal. The mandated liberal construction afforded to *pro se* pleadings means that if a court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which a plaintiff could prevail, it should do so, but a district court may not rewrite a petition to include claims that were never presented, *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999), or construct the plaintiff's legal arguments for him, *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417-18 (7th Cir. 1993), or "conjure up questions never squarely presented" to the

court, *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985).

Background

Plaintiff filed a document in letter form, which has been liberally construed as a civil action. The Defendant, Family Services, Inc., is a human service company, which offers financial management assistance to individuals and families.¹ Plaintiff indicates that he is a "veteran of the Vietnam era," and that the Defendant handles Plaintiff's money to include Plaintiff's "Va money, social security, and the \$30,000 [Plaintiff] won in a lawsuit." Plaintiff states the Defendant has reduced his spending money from seventy (\$70.00) dollars per week to twenty (\$20.00) dollars per week. Plaintiff claims this amount is insufficient for Plaintiff to purchase staples such as coffee, cereal and postage stamps. Plaintiff also claims that the Defendant has taken his computer, internet access, and long distance telephone service to "spite [Plaintiff] for an unusual bazar behavior associated with [Plaintiff's] mental illness." Plaintiff seeks an order from the Court forcing the Defendant to release Plaintiff's funds to the DAV (Disabled American Veterans Organization).

Discussion

In order for this Court to hear and decide a case, the Court must, first, have jurisdiction over the subject matter of the

¹ See <http://www.fsisc.org/topic.asp?pid=1>.

litigation. Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, "constrained to exercise only the authority conferred by Article III of the Constitution and affirmatively granted by federal statute." *In re Bulldog Trucking, Inc.*, 147 F.3d 347, 352 (4th Cir. 1998). Because federal courts have limited subject matter jurisdiction, there is no presumption that the court has jurisdiction. *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick, MD.*, 191 F.3d 394, 399 (4th Cir. 1999). Accordingly, a federal court is required, *sua sponte*, to determine if a valid basis for its jurisdiction exists, "and to dismiss the action if no such ground appears." *Bulldog Trucking*, 147 F.3d at 352. See also F. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3) ("If the court determines at any time that it lacks subject-matter jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the action").

A Plaintiff must allege the facts essential to show jurisdiction in his pleadings. *McNutt v. General Motors Acceptance Corp.*, 298 U.S. 178, 189 (1936). See also *Dracos v. Hellenic Lines, Ltd.*, 762 F. 2d 348, 350 (4th Cir. 1985) ("plaintiffs must affirmatively plead the jurisdiction of the court"). To this end, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(1) requires that the complaint provide "a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court's jurisdiction[.] " If, however, the complaint does not contain "an affirmative pleading of a jurisdictional basis, the federal court may find that it has jurisdiction if the facts supporting jurisdiction have been clearly pleaded." *Pinkley, Inc. v. City*

of *Frederick, MD.*, 191 F.3d at 399 (citing 2 *Moore's Federal Practice* § 8.03[3] (3d ed. 1997)).

Although the absence of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised at any time during the case, determining jurisdiction at the outset of the litigation is the most efficient procedure. *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999). If the court, viewing the allegations in the light most favorable to the Plaintiff, finds insufficient allegations in the pleadings, the court will lack subject matter jurisdiction. *Id.*

The two most commonly recognized and utilized bases for federal court jurisdiction are (1) "federal question," 28 U.S.C. § 1331, and (2) "diversity of citizenship," 28 U.S.C. § 1332. As discussed below, the allegations contained in the Plaintiff's complaint do not fall within the scope of either form of this Court's limited jurisdiction.

First, there is clearly no basis for a finding of diversity jurisdiction over this complaint. The diversity statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a), requires complete diversity of parties and an amount in controversy in excess of seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000.00):

(a) The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of all civil actions where the matter in controversy exceeds the sum or value of \$75,000, exclusive of interest and costs, and is between—

(1) citizens of different States[.]

28 U.S.C. § 1332 (emphasis added). Complete diversity of parties in a case means that no party on one side may be a citizen of the same state as any party on the other side. See *Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger*, 437 U.S. 365, 372-74 & nn. 13-16 (1978). The Court has no diversity jurisdiction over this case because, according to the Plaintiff's service document, he and the Defendant are both residents of South Carolina.² In absence of diversity of citizenship, the amount in controversy is irrelevant.

Second, the essential allegations contained in the complaint are insufficient to show that the case is one "arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States." 28 U.S.C. § 1331. Plaintiff's allegations do not contain any reference to an alleged violation of a federal statute or constitutional provision by the Defendant, nor is any type of federal question jurisdiction otherwise evident from the face of the complaint. Even if Plaintiff had made assertions that federal rights were violated, this Court would not be bound by such allegations and would be entitled to disregard them if the facts did not support Plaintiff's contentions. When considering the issue of whether "federal question" jurisdiction is present, a federal court is not bound by the parties' characterization of a case. District courts are

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28 U.S.C. § 1332(c)(1) indicates "a corporation shall be deemed to be a citizen of any State by which it has been incorporated and of the State where it has its principal place of business"

authorized to disregard such characterizations to avoid "unjust manipulation or avoidance of its jurisdiction." *Lyon v. Centimark Corp.*, 805 F. Supp. 333, 334-35 (E.D. N.C. 1992). See also *Louisville & Nashville R.R. v. Mottley*, 211 U.S. 149 (1908).

Additionally, Plaintiff appears to be suing a private company.³ However, purely private conduct, such as that alleged in this case, no matter how wrongful, injurious, fraudulent, or discriminatory, is not actionable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 or under the Fourteenth Amendment, the two most common provisions under which persons come into federal court to claim that others have violated their constitutional rights. See *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 936 (1982); *Burton v. Wilmington Parking Auth.*, 365 U.S. 715, 721 (1961). Plaintiff does not cite to either 42 U.S.C. § 1983⁴ or the Fourteenth Amendment in the complaint, nor does he claim that the Defendant has violated his constitutional rights. However, even had Plaintiff included such allegations, they would not establish "federal question" jurisdiction over this case, because there are no additional allegations of "state action"

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A corporation search on the South Carolina Secretary of State's website revealed that Family Services, Inc., is a domestic, non-profit organization, incorporated in South Carolina. See <http://www.scsos.com/Search%20Business%20Filings>.

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In order to state a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege that: (1) the defendant(s) deprived him or her of a federal right, and (2) did so under color of state law. *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980).

in connection with the Defendant's actions. In the absence of either diversity or federal question jurisdiction over the parties' dispute, this case should be summarily dismissed without issuance of process for the Defendant.

Finally, it is noted that Plaintiff appears to be seeking an order from this Court compelling the Defendant to release Plaintiff's money. However, mandamus relief against a private company is not a remedy that can be granted by the Court. District Courts, under 28 U.S.C. § 1361, have "original jurisdiction of any action in the nature of mandamus to compel an officer or employee of the United States or any agency thereof to perform a duty owed to the plaintiff." Thus, on its face, § 1361 extends federal mandamus jurisdiction only to federal officers or employees. See *United States v. Oncology Assocs.*, 198 F.3d 502, 510 (4th Cir. 1999). Should Plaintiff look to 28 U.S.C. § 1651, the "all writs statute," as a source of mandamus authority, relief would still be unavailable, as a writ of mandamus is limited to cases where federal courts are acting in aid of their respective jurisdictions. See 28 U.S.C. § 1651. See also *Gurley v. Superior Court of Mecklenburg County*, 411 F.2d 586, 587-588 & nn. 2-4 (4th Cir. 1969). Thus, the United States District Court for the District of South Carolina lacks jurisdiction under §§ 1361 and/or 1651 to grant the relief Plaintiff seeks.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Court dismiss the complaint in the above-captioned case *without prejudice* and without issuance and service of process. Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.



Robert S. Carr
United States Magistrate Judge

April 8, 2009
Charleston, South Carolina

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Court Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. In the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must "only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation." *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005).

Specific written objections must be filed within ten (10) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). The time calculation of this ten-day period excludes weekends and holidays and provides for an additional three (3) days for filing by mail. Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a) & (e). Filing by mail pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
P. O. Box 835
Charleston, South Carolina 29402

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985).